

*THE BEST TIMES*  
AND  
*THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS*

A CONTRAST

by

Melvin Landsberg

The world is an entertaining though horribly trying place, and it is best enjoyed when one is young. It is only in reference to his youth that Dos Passos uses the title *The Best Times* for the memoir he published in 1966. How otherwise could the name apply to his experiences with World War I and the Sacco-Vanzetti affair? Friendship and travel are the major joys he describes in his 233-page book, which takes us from his birth to the years when *U.S.A.* was appearing. Sharing vicariously in his friendships and travels gives the book much of its savour.

I read recently that a Random House poll of literary critics has found *The Education of Henry Adams* the best work of non-fiction originally published in English in the twentieth century. Nobody asked my opinion, but if someone had I would have made a much more modest claim for *The Best Times: An Informal Memoir* (to use the full name). It is a neglected work, more sunny, more charitable, immensely more spirited, and at least as intelligent and interesting. Note that I do not claim that it, or any other book, is one of a select hundred.

Let us look first at each subject's achievements, a major source of our interest in any autobiography. And let us look too at what each wanted. Adams was an impressive historian, a journalist, the editor of the *North American Review*, and a Harvard professor. But a huge item in his account of his career was a strong grievance: the post-Civil War milieu did not allow him—a public-spirited and capable (as he saw himself) scion of the three generations of statesmen to become president, or at least a leader in the nation.

Dos Passos was primarily a novelist, at his peak a great one, though never in *The Best Times* does he apply a yardstick to himself. He comes closest to the subject in the following passage, about his views in the early 1920s:

Literary invention could never be made really reputable. A writer who took his trade seriously would be sure to get more kicks than ha'pence. He would be lucky if he stayed out of jail. In my revulsion against wartime stupidities, as a priest takes a vow of celibacy, I had taken a private vow of allegiance to an imaginary humanist republic which to me represented the struggle for life against the backdrag of death and stagnation. Figures like Giordano Bruno,

Erasmus, Rabelais, Montaigne presided over my republic of letters. Among its latterday saints I classed Shelley, Stendahl, Flaubert, possibly Walt Whitman and Rimbaud.

This isn't the sort of thing one talks about, even to intimate friends, but it is these private dedications that mold men's lives. In this context the number of copies a book sold was neither here nor there. The celebrity racket made no sense at all (134).<sup>1</sup>

Like Adams fifty-eight years before, Dos Passos attended Harvard College, but compared to Adams he was a gamin. Adams in his first sentence relates that he was born on Beacon Hill in Boston in 1838 and christened later by his uncle, the minister of the First Unitarian Church. Being a great grandson of John Adams and a grandson of John Quincy Adams, he was at the pinnacle of social distinction from the start.

Dos Passos' memoir does not even say where he was born—in Chicago, far from his father's and mother's separate homes, as he was the unacknowledged love child of a married man. The novelist's paternal grandfather fell light years short of John Quincy Adams' distinction; he was, Dos Passos tells us, a short-tempered man who left Madeira in a rush because of "some incident involving a stabbing" (4). He worked as a cobbler and later as a shoemaker in Baltimore, then moved to Philadelphia, where he married and had children. Though the family was poor and had little food, Dos Passos' grandfather would throw dinner out the window if his wife hadn't prepared it just right. Dos Passos' father, a forceful person, became an outstanding lawyer despite his impoverished childhood.

Dos Passos was not baptized, a fact that discomfited proper people when he was a boy, and he did not bear his father's name at Choate, the preparatory school he attended. Indeed, there is more than a whiff of the picaresque in his memoir.

Adams says he "made no acquaintance in college which proved to have the smallest use in after life" (64). "... never would he have need of acquaintance to strengthen his social standing; but he needed greatly some one to show him how to use the acquaintance he cared to make" (64).<sup>2</sup>

Dos Passos, unlike Adams, was hungry for friends who had personal qualities to which he could relate.<sup>3</sup> He made many at college, particularly on the *Harvard Monthly*, and enlivens his memoir with accounts of numbers of them: E. E. Cummings; Dudley Poore, another poet; Stewart Mitchell, later a historian; Robert Hillyer, a third poet; Arthur McComb, who became an art historian, and two who died early, Edward Massey, a playwright, and Wright McCormick, a journalist.

Of the friends he made in Spain after college, he describes José (Pepe) Giner, a devout young man who knew

"every sacristan and every forgotten masterpiece in the villages tucked away in the rolling lands of Castile" (30). Together the two walked through these lands and climbed in the Sierra Guadarrama. Another young Spaniard with whom he made trips, and who became a lifelong friend, was Pepe Robles, a cynical, sharp-tongued student who "laughed at everything," and was an "*aficionado* of bull-fights" (32, 33).

The secret behind his friendships was that he was receptive to a wide variety of human beings. In the years after World War I, for example, he, E. E. Cummings, and some of their friends found the Jewish East Side "particularly romantic."

Saturday nights we would foregather at Moskowitz's "Rumanian Broilings" on a street east of Second Avenue.

Mr. Moskowitz was a courtly waspwaisted little man who played the zymbalom while we drank his wine. . . .

Sometimes we talked about the Russian Revolution with Yiddish journalists and poets. These were well-informed and skeptical people. . . . Mr. Moskowitz played well. He liked to feel he was an artist among artists. Sometimes he would be so moved by the enthusiasm of our response that he would distribute free wine (84).

Contrast this comment with Henry Adams', when he writes of coming into New York from Europe in 1868:

His world was dead. Not a Polish Jew fresh from Warsaw or Cracow—not a furtive Yacoob or Ysaac still reeking of the Ghetto, snarling a weird Yiddish to the officers of the customs—but had a keener instinct, an intenser energy, and a freer hand than he—American of Americans, with Heaven knew how many Puritans and Patriots behind him, and an education that had cost a civil war (238).

In the *Education* we see the American Civil War from England with Adams. He served as private secretary to his father, the U.S. Minister to Great Britain, who sought to keep that country from aiding the Confederacy with armaments and recognizing it as an independent nation. The climax of the account of diplomatic maneuverings comes when Minister Adams, trying in 1863 to stop the preparation and unleashing of two ironclad rams built for the Confederacy, informs Lord Russell, the British foreign minister: "It would be superfluous in me to point out to

your lordship that this is war!" (172) Following his main thread, treating all his experiences as failures in his education, Adams tells how he misconstrued the intentions of Lord Palmerston, the prime minister, and of Russell. Amid his accounts of his father's policies, he tells about how he himself fared in the London social season.

For Dos Passos, the most memorable war in his memoir is also the one he knew in his twenties: Word War I in Europe. And he writes as a direct participant, often a front-line ambulance driver there. A pacifist and a socialist believing in revolution, he went to Europe because that was where the greatest and most momentous drama in the world was occurring. Once by the French front—and being twenty-one—he wrote of "building myself a snail shell of hysterical laughter against the hideousness of war" and "having a wonderful time" (51).

Education for Dos Passos came at every turn. Early in his activity on the road supplying Verdun, he and his friends Hillyer and Frederik van den Arend found a country villa that a shell had completely demolished; they were delighted, however, to find that it had a beautiful backhouse which was entirely intact. The three kept the place, with its scrubbed deal seats, their secret.

We had found the latrines the most hideous feature of the wartime scene, slippery planks over stinking pits. The Boche seemed to have an evil intuition about them; as soon as you squatted with your pants down, he would start to shell (42).

Does Henry Adams, in the five-hundred pages of his *Education*, written in an elevated diction nowhere descending to the plebeian, ever use a privy?

Before he left Europe, following his discharge from the Red Cross for writing pacifist letters, Dos Passos had a haunting experience. After an American offensive, probably Château Thierry, he answered a call for volunteer to work at a base hospital in Paris.

The night I particularly remember it was my job to carry off buckets full of amputated arms and hands and legs from an operating room.

Who could hold on to dogmatic opinions in the face of these pathetic remnants of shattered humanity? (70)

Still another part of his education came after he managed to get into the American army after his return to the United States. Now he was with ordinary American soldiers, not college volunteers; a farm boy from Indiana and an Italian from one of the western states helped him conceive of Chrisfield and Fuselli, two of the main characters in *Three Soldiers*.

"One friend in a lifetime is much; two are many; three are hardly possible," says Adams (312). For him in the *Education*, it was two: Clarence King, the geologist, and John Hay, the author and diplomat, who was Secretary of State under Presidents McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. Writing of the deaths of these two, Adams says that it was time for him to go:

The three friends had begun life together; and the last of the three had no motive—no attraction—to carry it on after the others had gone. Education had ended for all three (505).

For Dos Passos, the gates of admission to friendship are wider, and the procession of friends, as he sees them, is long. To follow his memoir is to view this procession, and also his ability to bond with many kinds of people.

In 1921 he and Cummings sailed from New Bedford to Portugal on the freighter *Mormugão*. Before they left, Arthur McComb gave Dos Passos *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma*, by Henry Adams and his brother Brooks, to read on the ship. Dos Passos says that he hated the book "because it went against the Walt Whitman-narodnik optimism about people I've never quite lived down" (87). From Paris he went on across the Balkans and Turkey, witnessing untold post-war horrors along the way. In New York, he had met Paxton Hibben, an American who had been a U.S. diplomat, then a war correspondent, and now was with the Near East Relief. The two were by this time friends. Hibben was unable to get him work with the N.E.R., but instead got him a document allowing passage in a Soviet railway boxcar to the Persian border. In the boxcar he formed a friendly relationship with a Persian physician, *Sayid Hassan Tabataba*, who was returning home from a German medical school, and together they travelled on to Teheran. After Dos Passos made his way, by car, wagon, and rail to Baghdad (as ever, noting terrain, customs, and monuments on the way), a sympathetic British official arranged for him to journey in an Arab caravan to Damascus.

Over five weeks of sometimes dangerous travel under the protection of Jassem-er-Rawwaf, the tall, dark-bearded caravan leader, followed. Once again in the memoir, Dos Passos displays his interest in and liking for people. Sitting at Jassem's campfire, he listens to the leader tell of his country in southern Arabia, and tries to explain how much he likes the life the Agail people live in the desert. Jassam invites him to give up the "stinking cities" and come live with them (117). However, when Dos Passos has a shave in Damascus and puts on a western suit, Jassem, tears in his eyes, repudiates him.

In the chapters following that which describes the caravan, Dos Passos talks much more about his friends or acquaintances, those we have mentioned and others. Many are celebrities, among them F. Scott Fitzgerald, Edmund

Wilson, Archibald MacLeish, Hart Crane, John Howard Lawson, Mike Gold, Picasso, Léger, Blaise Cendrars. Others are less well known, e.g., Dawn Powell and John Peale Bishop; still others are far from being public figures. None of the celebrities seems imported to gain the book notice; they were all very much part of his experiences. And however strong his liking, he can be memorable in judgment. Fond as he was of Cummings, he remarks of him in later life: "Tolerance is not a New England vice" (134). Of F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose talent he admired, he says: "The idea of being that kind of celebrity set my teeth on edge" (130). Fernand Léger and Pablo Picasso were friends of Sara Murphy, another of his friends, and Léger became a favorite of Dos Passos; but of Picasso, he says: "He was skill incarnate . . . if he had had the gift of compassion he would have been as great as Michelangelo" (153).

Dos Passos in leading up to the cooling of Hemingway's friendship, has a memorable passage, not quite a page long, but too long to quote here. The gist is: "As a man matures he sheds possibilities with every passing year. In the same way he sheds friendships" (218-219).

Hemingway had turned on his friend after Dos Passos denounced the activities of the Communists in the Spanish Civil War, and afterwards had wounded him with his comments. Dos Passos does not write of these later occurrences. But amid his more happy recollections of times with Hemingway, he has bits like: "Hem was the greatest fellow in the world to go around with when everything went right" (201). Quite deftly Dos Passos identifies the turning point in their relationship with an incident in Key West: Hemingway caught Dos Passos throwing his Panama hat at, and trying to ring, a plaster cast of a badly botched bust of his difficult friend (220).

By and large, though, Dos Passos' tone is one of fond remembrance, as with his recollections of John Howard Lawson, who had onesidedly ended their relationship when Dos Passos wouldn't stop denouncing the Communists.

Henry Adams' extensive descriptions of his travels in Europe, in the chapters "Berlin (1858-1859)" and "Rome (1859-1860)," are rich in commentary and sometimes skillfully pithy. But as he subordinates the information to his quest for education, one recalls them primarily as well-wrought cerebration.

To read Dos Passos on his trip through the Caucasus in 1928 is, on the other hand, not merely to participate in the trip, but to do so through the senses and mind of a novelist renowned for his ability to create place, as in *Manhattan Transfer* and *U.S.A.* A few sentences stand out in my mind:

From the moment we left Shattoi—these names are all spelled wrong, I never could find them on any map—we were riding up one mountain pass after another. The guides would never take their horses farther than the next valley

because it would be inhabited by a different people and they didn't know the language. The Russians were helpless as I was. At every night's stop we had to find fresh interpreters. . . . The uplands were sheep country. A shepherd we met on the road had never heard of America (184-185).

On part of the trip he travelled with Horsley Gantt, a Virginia physician who had been studying with Pavlov for years. The two Americans had met by chance in a Leningrad hotel, and they struck up a friendship that lasted until Dos Passos' death.

Near the start of Dos Passos' memoir, there is a longer and more vivid portrait than any of his others, that of his father. From "The Camera Eye" in *The Forty-Second Parallel*, we know how difficult the relationship must have been. In *The Best Times*, Dos Passos writes of another side of it: his father's friendship and intellectual tutorship. In introducing his account of the elder Dos Passos, the son makes clear how much pent-up emotion he has felt:

For years a wooden box full of my father's letters has stood on my mantel at Spence's Point. . . . Time and again I have started reading the letters, but each time it has been as if a great fist squeezed my heart. I just couldn't go on (1).

Charles Francis Adams might have been an even more engaging subject for the son's memoir, but Henry eschews an intimate account. The father was a dedicated and skilled diplomat, who worked under trying conditions and with inadequate resources. His country, as the son makes clear, owed him much. But the relationship between father and son is shadowy, for the son's emphasis in telling of his years as private secretary is, as ever, on the failure of yet another episode in his quest for an education.

After Arthur McComb pushed Dos Passos to read *The Education*, Dos Passos wrote him in October 1922:

My apologies to Mr. Adams. The *Education* is by far the most interesting American document I've thus far encountered, and as a sourcebook for utilitarianism is perfect. Imagine, it took him till he was 61 years of age to discover that woman's sex was a force in the world! The very unspectacular quality of it is vastly instructive.<sup>4</sup>

Dos Passos was intending, in part, to tease McComb. Adams' symbols endure as literature, though they are only

curious relics as historiography. Many in the nineteenth century believed that science would constitute a model for the study of society. Thus Adams writes as a historian seeking to model his subject on what he thinks of as scientific method. But he is unable to discover continuity—as expressions of force—among historical periods. How does one draw a line from the Middle Ages, when the Virgin Mary energized a society to construct cathedrals, to the beginning of the twentieth, when the power of the dynamo makes one want to worship it?

What kind of education enabled one to succeed, whether economically, politically, or morally, in this world of increasing energy? *The Best Times*, while not posing Adams' recurring question, addresses it implicitly by the value to which it adheres—social sympathy.<sup>5</sup> As for individual success, for Dos Passos it is in maintaining the ideals of his "imaginary humanist republic."

While Adams' *Education* is available in several editions—including a superb one, edited by Samuels, with appendices, variant readings, copious notes, a bibliography, and a good index—*The Best Times* is now out of print. Readers today need a second edition of Dos Passos' memoir, retaining his illustrations, and adding an index, something I miss greatly in the first edition.

## Notes

1. All page references to Dos Passos' memoir are to *The Best Times: An Informal Memoir* (first printing). New York: New American Library, 1966.

2. All page references to Adams' memoirs are to *The Education of Henry Adams*. Edited by Ernest Samuels. Riverside Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1973.

3. Some readers may object to this contrast of Dos Passos' and Adams' comments on their undergraduate friendships, as well as contrasts of later matters, by saying that Adams was not writing an autobiography, but an account of an education. Ernest Samuels says that Adams did not authorize the subtitle "An Autobiography," on the title page of the 1918 edition, and he therefore omits it from his own edition (xxiv). However, I know of no exemplary autobiography that is merely a catch-all. Every one has its theme or themes, and in this respect Adams' book, with all its literary devices, and its subordinations, reticences, and omissions, is the "autobiography" he chose to write.

4. John Dos Passos and Arthur K. McComb, *John Dos Passos' Correspondence with Arthur K. McComb*. Edited by Melvin Landsberg (Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1991), 200.

5. I am reminded of Walt Whitman's line in *Song of Myself*: "... whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own funeral drest in his shroud." Section 48 of the poem, in *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by Walt Whitman*. Riverside Edition. Edited by James E. Miller, Jr. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1959.

# **RICHARD ELLSWORTH SAVAGE:**

## **A CHARACTER WITH A PRONOUNCED LACK OF CHARACTER**

by

Melvin Landsberg

The final Richard Ellsworth Savage section (*The Big Money*, pp. 477–519)<sup>1</sup> gives us our last glimpse of the trio of major characters in *U.S.A.*—J. Ward Moorehouse, Eleanor Stoddard, and Savage—who become and remain genuine business “successes” in a capitalist society that John Dos Passos scorned in the 1930s. Moorehouse, with all his fortune, is a lonely man; he married merely for money, and then by his callous behavior helped drive his wife insane. Eleanor has ended her close companionship with him to marry a Russian prince and acquire a title, an empty one, as the Russian aristocracy no longer exists in its homeland. But for Eleanor the marriage will be one more step away from the stinking Chicago stockyards, where her father worked. Neither Moorehouse nor Savage will lift a finger to help Eveline Hutchins, a mutual friend, who is frantically seeking to back the production of a play by an author she hopes to marry. In the next narrative section, she will commit suicide, after the author abandons her for another woman.

All three successes are without altruism or compassion, though Savage may have glimmerings of them. Unlike Moorehouse and Stoddard, he possesses all the elements for genuine distinction: intelligence, good looks, polite manners, easy sociability, a prestigious private school and Harvard education, literary and linguistic talent—all the elements, that is, except character. It is Dos

Passos’ unfolding of Savage’s lack of character that makes Savage a memorable figure in *U.S.A.* And a significant one too, for Dos Passos, like Walt Whitman in *Democratic Vistas*, saw a widespread lack of character among the American middle class of his time, and blamed it for many public and private evils.<sup>2</sup>

We follow Savage through a week in New York and Washington, D.C. Now probably in his early thirties, he is earning \$15,000 a year (quite a sum in the 1920s) as one of two chief assistants to the public relations tycoon Moorehouse. He and the other assistant, Ed Griscolm, are competing in working up a campaign to get Moorehouse’s firm the lucrative account for E.R. Bingham’s patent medicine empire. By the end of the section, Savage has triumphed over Griscolm, Moorehouse has become ill with heart disease, and Savage—now earning \$25,000—is taking charge of the New York office. From a business standpoint, his is an exemplary success story.

But psychologically his life, already wretched, is careening towards disaster. He has become a compulsive drinker, who drinks continually and heavily. His deportment in the Moorehouse firm is all strategy. On Moorehouse’s broaching the topic of self-medication, we read: “Dick twisted his face into a look of lively interest.” During the ensuing business conference, “when J.W. smiled Dick smiled too.” Off the job, Dick tells Eveline Hutchins: “I’ve been working for him for years now and I don’t know whether he’s a genius or a stuffed shirt.” But to Reggie Talbot, a young friend working in the firm, he says: “He’s the most brilliant figure in the publicrelations field” (*BM*: 479, 480, 487, 482). Then he feels ashamed of the oily note in his voice and shuts up.

When he lets himself go psychologically, the result is disastrous. Towards the end of the section he is dancing cheek to cheek “with a soft-handed brown boy in a tight-fitting suit the color of his skin” in a basement dive in Harlem (*BM*: 516–17). After being brought home by two people from that place, he wakes to find his head bleeding and his money gone, and he worries that he may be black-mailed.

Moorehouse is simple and opportunistic in his view of the world, but Savage is sophisticated and cynical, and hence far more reprehensible if one shares the novelist’s values. An English major at Harvard College, Savage is on the staffs of the *Monthly* and the *Advocate*, and he is a pacifist at the start of the war. At almost every turn in his story, he is aware that he is betraying religious, social, or personal values. When as a teen-ager, he engages in an adulterous affair with the wife of an Episcopalian minister who is his friend, he is afraid that he has committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. From Italy he writes the two that the war is corrupt and insane, and later in Paris he buys a pocket compass and plans to go across the French border into Spain. Once there he will send out “flaming poems and manifestoes, calling young men to revolt against their butchers” (*NN*: 211). Instead, on the ship back to the United States, he guiltily drops the compass overboard.

### **THE JOHN DOS PASSOS NEWSLETTER**

The Newsletter seeks to promote scholarship on and interest in Dos Passos’ writings and biography, and will publish short articles on these subjects. It will also publish news items, notes, letters, and queries on these and other relevant matters. Among these matters are work in progress, manuscript locations and accessions, bibliographies, and textual scholarship.

For return of manuscripts, contributors should send, along with their submissions, stamped envelopes addressed to themselves. They should address all queries and manuscripts to the editor, Melvin Landsberg, Department of English, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-2115.

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Dick through the influences of a family friend and of his family background is helped to a lieutenancy in Ordinance. On the ship going to France the second time he ingratiates himself with a West Point major, and tears up a joking letter, in doggerel, about his good fortune in the Army, dropping the scraps down a toilet. His discarding of the letter and the compass are both symbolic of his surrender of integrity. Soon he is a captain in the Army Post Dispatch Service.

True, he still retains his political views, and tells Anne Elizabeth Trent ("Daughter") that the people of Europe are being betrayed, and that President Woodrow Wilson's face is like a reptile's. But after he hears that many people got sentenced to twenty years in prison for refusing to register for the draft, he tells a former companion in the ambulance service: "Well, that comes of monkeying with the buzzsaw"—echoing a caution that an official in Paris had given Savage when he was expelled from the Red Cross (NN: 383).

Savage's betrayal of Daughter, whom he gets pregnant and then abandons, once again proclaims his lack of integrity. But it is also related to his bisexuality; he clearly does not want an enduring sexual attachment to a woman, though he all the more seeks challenges in heterosexual escapades.

At the start of Savage's story his mother, the daughter of a deceased general, works in a genteel boarding house owned by her sister. She and her children formerly lived in the Chicago suburb Oak Park and had servants, but then Richard's father was convicted of a crime and sent to Atlanta Penitentiary. The mother never forgives her husband, and probably gives Richard and his elder brother the idea that they must restore her to easy circumstances. Her selfishness and self-pity are a model for Richard's, and her situation a recurrent excuse for his defaults. When a colonel laughingly asks him: "Can you see yourself as a public relations counsel," he answers: "Well, I've got my mother to think of." Later he tells Daughter: "I can't support a child until I have some definite career, and I've got my mother to support" (NN: 379, 389). While working for Moorehouse, he lives in a New York apartment on 56th Street with his mother, whom he sends to vacation resorts. Refusing to help Eveline Hutchins with a couple of thousand dollars, he says: "I'm flat broke . . . and Mother has to be supported in the style to which she is accustomed" (BM: 485).

What are we to make of his name? First, as to "Richard," Dos Passos might perhaps be playing with the "way to wealth" theme in *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Just as Savage is getting a job with Moorehouse, Eleanor counsels him about Anne Elizabeth: "She's a cute little thing...but you oughtn't to marry just yet, of course it's none of my business...an unsuitable marriage has been the ruination of many a promising young fellow." Later, while Savage is falling asleep in bed after he has turned Daughter away, Dos Passos writes about him thus: "Poor Dick got to go to work after the signing of the peace.

Poor Tom's cold. Poor Dickyboy...Richard...He brought his feet up to where he could rub them. Poor Richard's feet" (NN: 393, 397).

As for the name "Ellsworth," Dick is the grandson of a General Ellsworth, who campaigned against the Apache chief Geronimo. And what of the name "Savage"? With Dick's polite background, he would seem to merit a more genteel name. Of course, "savages" was white Americans' common designation for the warriors led by Geronimo. As we evaluate Richard Ellsworth Savage's behavior, we may infer an irony in the name, reminiscent of Thorstein Veblen's in describing much of contemporary "civilized" culture as barbarian.

Dick certainly savages Daughter, as well as Reggie Talbot, whom he allows to be fired without warning after he is irritated by Reggie's irreverent banter about Moorehouse, and Reggie's fiancée's rejecting Savage's drunken advances. And he savages society in a career devoted to such campaigns as defeating pure food and drug legislation. What should not escape notice is that he also savages literature itself and his entire humanistic education by some of his daily remarks. Explaining to his brother why he left a French whorehouse to which he had brought him, he quotes from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, saying: "I haven't got any morals but I'm finicky..., Epicurus' owne sonne." And commenting to Eleanor about Daughter's death, he says: "What did you expect me to do, jump into the grave like Hamlet?" (NN: 354, 462).

When he takes a job with Moorehouse's firm, he writes his mother from Paris that he will be able "to continue my real work on the side" (NN: 394). He is adept at writing verse, but there is no reason to think that he was ever a poet pursuing truth. While Savage was at Harvard, we read: "He managed to find time to polish up a group of sonnets called *Morituri Te Salutant* that he sent to a prize competition run by *The Literary Digest*. It won the prize but the editors wrote back that they would prefer a note of hope in the last sestet. Dick put in the note of hope and sent the hundred dollars to Mother to go to Atlantic City with" (NN: 96).

When Moorehouse reminisces about his once having wanted to be a songwriter, Dick responds: "Shake hands, J.W., with the ruins of a minor poet" (BM: 492). If he had not met Moorehouse, I imagine, he would have become one of the debonair writers frequenting the dining room of the Algonquin Hotel in New York.

A biography of Randolph Bourne, shortly following the first section on Savage, provides a stark contrast to him. An impoverished hunchback who was constantly in physical pain, Bourne worked his way through Columbia University. By the spring of 1917, he had gained recognition as a social critic and author setting forth progressive reforms. But he wrecked his career by opposing the war, and died virtually silenced, leaving his uncompromising writings and his example of integrity as legacies.

Arresting as the portrait of Savage is, we note that it is but a small part of the overall subject of Dos Passos'



trilogy—the United States of America. In another essay I have called this overall, dominant subject of his trilogy “the thirteenth character,” contrasting it with the twelve major fictional characters. We must at some point shift our focus and ask how Savage is shaped by the society of which he is a part and the milieu in which he advances his career; and, in view of the many similarities between U.S. pecuniary culture of the 1920s and of our own time, we might well see the query as germane in our lives. But this is matter for another, and longer, essay.

### Notes

1. All citations are from John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* New York: The Modern Library, 1937. *NN* will refer to *Nineteen-Nineteen* and *BM* to *The Big Money*.

2. See Melvin Landsberg, *Dos Passos' Path to "U.S.A."* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1972), pp. 226, 256 n. 82.

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### Letter

#### ALDERMAN LIBRARY GETS BERNARDIN-DOS PASSOS PAPERS

*Alderman Library, at the University of Virginia, has recently acquired the papers of the late Professor Charles W. Bernardin of Villanova University, who died in February 1996, at the age of seventy-eight. These papers will be described in some detail in the forthcoming catalog of John Dos Passos papers and materials in Alderman's Special Collections Department. Mrs. Ann Southwell, in reply to our questions, has kindly sent us the following letter.*

To the Editor:

The papers of Charles W. Bernardin concern his proposed biography of John Dos Passos. The first installment (temporarily labelled 5950-ck) contains Robert Hillyer's unpublished copy of *Seven Times Round the Walls of Jericho*, a photocopy of Bernardin's dissertation "The Development of Dos Passos"; the unpublished 2 volume biography of Dos Passos by Bernardin (Volume 1, which goes through the publication of *Three Soldiers*, is completed. Volume 2, through *Manhattan Transfer*, is not); an earlier version of Volume 2 titled *The Prime Years: John Dos Passos*; a typescript and notes for an unfinished study of Hemingway and Dos Passos by Bernardin; and photographs of Dos Passos and family members and associates.

The second installment (temporarily labelled 5950-cm) contains 87 letters between Dos Passos and Bernardin, 1942-1966. The very first letter, January 3, 1942, outlines Dos Passos' views on communism and liberalism. He compares Marxism with Mohammedanism and talks about the Sacco-Vanzetti case. Many of these letters contain checklists/questionnaires by Bernardin returned with written commentary by Dos Passos. For example in 1951 the questionnaire deals with various books that Dos Passos might have read which could have influenced his writing. Another of the same year talks about Dos Passos's war experiences on the Italian front.

The papers were a gift to the University of Virginia Library by Bernardin's children, in two installments received in May and December 1999.

I hope this material will be of some use to you . . . and we will send you a copy of the guide as soon as it is published.

ANN SOUTHWELL  
Manuscripts Cataloger  
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